

WHISKEY SOAKED AND HELL BOUND: LYNYRD SKYNYRD AND SOUTHERN CULTURE

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(Resumen)

Aunque el grupo sureño Lynyrd Skynyrd alcanzó audiencia nacional por su especial modo de hacer rock del sur, en toda su carrera se aprecia una fuerte defensa de los valores tradicionales de la cultura sureña. La bandera confederada en todas sus portadas, el orgullo regional, el agrarianismo rural, y la apología al macho sureño, todo ello proyectado en violencia y provocación, convirtieron al grupo en paradigma del conservadurismo del Viejo Sur.

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Unlike other hard rock groups, the legendary Southern rock and roll band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, did not emerge from the urban ghettos of such cities as London or New York, instead it came out of the rural South. This "rough and tough and plenty mean" Southern band utilized regional cultural traits to become one of the best hard rock bands that the South ever produced. In 1974 *Melody Maker*, a major rock and roll trades magazine, claimed that Lynyrd Skynyrd's "brand" of Southern rock music had swept across the Southern states. Band members and Southerners, Ronnie Van Zant, Allen Collins, Gary Rossington, Billy Powell, Leon Wilkeson, Artimus Pyle and Steve Gaines understood the mind-set of the young rural Southerners who listened to their music; thus they were able to speak for a generation of young Southern men. Lynyrd Skynyrd merits study as a major element of Southern popular culture because it had a significant influence on rock 'n' roll. In fact, the band has been labeled as "one of the most inventive rock bands of the seventies." Similarly, Jon Pareles, a rock critic for *The New York Times*, called Lynyrd Skynyrd the "cornerstones of Southern rock," and Chris Salewicz, a record reviewer for the influential British rock magazine *The New Musical Express*, stated that at the "very least" the band's album *Nuthin' Fancy*, justified the "existence of Southern Rock." Finally, Lynyrd Skynyrd fits nicely into the intellectual mind-set of the new South.¹

In 1965 the nucleus of Lynyrd Skynyrd (Van Zant, Collins, and Rossington) met in junior high school and formed the band My Backyard, which tried to imitate the Yardbirds, Otis Redding, Jimmy Reed, Bo Diddley, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck. During the late 1960s, the band changed its name to the Wild Cats, the Noble 5, the Pretty Ones, and the One Percent respectively. The band was discontent with those labels, so by 1970 the members decided to name themselves after a high school gym teacher,

1. Goldstein 52; Roxon 321-323; Charlesworth 52; Pareles, "Pop in Review, Lynyrd Skynyrd: Beacon Theater"; Salewicz 16.

Leonard Skinner, who punished them for their long hair. Although Lynyrd Skynyrd had original tunes, the group relied heavily upon songs popularized by Cream, Led Zeppelin, and Jimi Hendrix when it played school dates. By 1971 the band members had dropped out of high school, added Wilkeson and Powell to the lineup, shifted to their own material, and began playing the rough and tough bar circuit of the Deep South. Van Zant claimed that the band paid its dues in this brutal atmosphere (Sievert 69; Swenson).

The band endured the grueling life of performing in rough Southern bars for approximately eight years until Al Kooper (the driving force behind the Blues Project and Blood, Sweat and Tears) discovered the band while scouting groups for MCA's Sounds of the South label in 1972. When Kooper first saw and heard Lynyrd Skynyrd at Funocchio's (a notorious Atlanta bar) he realized that this band typified Southern fried Delta rock, a mixture of Blues and Country Rock. His assumptions were not unfounded because Lynyrd Skynyrd became the only Southern band, signed by the Sounds of the South label, that found fame and fortune. Although numerous critics praised the group's first album, and the Southern bar crowd knew first-hand that Lynyrd Skynyrd could thrill an audience, the rest of the nation did not understand the band's remarkable talents until the lead guitarist for The Who (Pete Townshend) got the group employed as an opening act for The Who's Quadrophenia tour in 1973. Under the new management of Peter Rudge, promoter of The Who and the Rolling Stones, Lynyrd Skynyrd was unchallenged as the leading Southern rock 'n' roll band until that fateful day in 1977 when "That Smell" finally caught up with them. In the song "That Smell," Lynyrd Skynyrd spoke of what happened when a person used too much drugs and alcohol— they died.²

Why does Lynyrd Skynyrd's music still sell fifteen years after the band meet its demise in a fiery plane crash near Gillsburg, Mississippi, in 1977? One reason is that the band set itself apart musically from other Southern boogie bands of the 1970's. The band can be singled out, because it utilized the talents of three lead guitarists as opposed to two lead guitarists. This three guitar combination produced a powerfully unique sound which topped other Southern groups (such as the Allman Brothers) that used a two guitar lead. Even though Lynyrd Skynyrd was not the first band to utilize the three guitar combination, (Buffalo Springfield and Moby Grape also employed this guitar blend) it maximized the effects of this technique better than all other groups. According to Geraldo Feeney, a rock critic for *Billboard* (one of the paramount rock magazines of all times), Lynyrd Skynyrd's superior guitar work made the band's music "unforgettable." Similarly, Jon Sievert, a critic for the popular rock magazine *Guitar Player*, maintained that the group's music was "muscular and tightly structured," because all three guitarists were capable of "multiple textures." Instead of the typical roar and rumble sound of other three guitar groups, Lynyrd

2. There were many reviews which praised the groups. *Listening Post*, for example, stated that "not all may recognize the name (Lynyrd Skynyrd) but critics were enthusiastic about their first album." See "Lynyrd Skynyrd: Second Helping."

Skynyrd's music was full of "blistering harmony lines, shifting rhythms, masterful dynamics, and multiple tones" (Feeney; Sievert; Swenson).

Lynyrd Skynyrd not only performed rock more skillfully than all other Southern groups, it understood what a national audience wanted. Instead of filling its concerts and records with lengthy Southern "jam sessions" and "mindless" boogie numbers, Lynyrd Skynyrd performed a more nationally accepted form of Southern rock 'n' roll. In other words, the band played Delta rock 'n' roll fast and hard. This new approach to Southern rock propelled the band into the American mainstream. In fact, several critics claimed that Lynyrd Skynyrd was the "only Southern band capable of retaining the interest of, say, a New Yorker strong on Bad Company." Lynyrd Skynyrd performed its variety of Southern rock so masterfully that its album, *Second Helping*, still rated seventh of the all-time best 500 heavy metal albums in 1991. No other Southern band has come close to achieving that ranking. Furthermore, most of Lynyrd Skynyrd's albums acquired gold, platinum, and/or multi-platinum status. By doing that, Lynyrd Skynyrd assured itself that its music would receive ample air play. In 1976, for example, its tune "Free Bird" became the song that finally dislodged Led Zeppelin's "Stairway To Heaven" as the "most requested FM song in America." By 1988 the band had secured a place in rock history when Chuck Eddy, a well known rock critic for the highly successful rock magazine *Creem*, maintained that Lynyrd Skynyrd was the number three American rock band of the "modern age."³

Lynyrd Skynyrd also became popular because it toured more than most bands of the 1970's. A typical year saw the band on the road more than 300 days. The band would deliver at least 250 concerts within that grueling time period. In 1975, for instance, the band performed 88 one-nighters in 95 days. Although the group constantly and skillfully played the hard "piss and grime" rock that young Southerners loved, that is only one of the reasons for Lynyrd Skynyrd's Southern popularity. The band's acceptance throughout the South was mainly due to its members who were seen as archetypal Southern males. That is to say, they

3. See Point. One of the closer Southern LPs, for example, was the critically acclaimed *Raunch and Roll* (performed by Black Oak Arkansas), but this recording only ranked 196. See Eddy, *Stairway To Hell: The 500 Best Heavy Metal Albums in the Universe*; and Kubernik. Almost ten years after the death of the band, its records were still popular. First, several recut albums were released. Second, in August 1987 *Billboard* listed the newest Multi-platinum and Platinum albums. Included in this category of Multi-platinum albums was Lynyrd Skynyrd's "One More From the Road" (3 million copies sold), "Gold & Platinum" (3 million copies sold), "Pronounced Leh-nerd Skin-nerd" (2 million copies sold), "Second Helping" (2 million copies sold), and "Street Survivors" (2 million copies sold). See also Grein 8, 83; Eddy, "Lynyrd Skynyrd: Legend." Between the plane crash in 1977 and the year 1987 Lynyrd Skynyrd (and its spin off the Rossington-Collins band) had sold over 20 million records without touring. See "Peavey & Lynyrd Skynyrd Celebrate Collaboration."

acted like a bunch of macho, whiskey-soaked, hell-bent roughnecks, with a taste for Wild Turkey as great as their desire for a fight ("The Rotgut Life"; Glazer 18, 20).

By combining elements of Southern culture with the strength of rock music, Lynyrd Skynyrd's popularity soared. The band's longevity in the rural South occurred because it adhered to an assortment of Southern themes. In dealing with Lynyrd Skynyrd, historians must remember that the original band members were products of a Southern culture that the band and many young Southerners viewed as a nightmare. In fact, Van Zant claimed that when he quit school he realized that he had to continue playing music "no matter how tough things got," because the only other "job I'd be able to get was chopping cotton." The South also cultivated a variety of negative cultural traits, such as regional pride, violence, and romanticism. Many young males were coerced by the region in which they lived to exhibit those three qualities in order to be respected⁴ (Freedland 42).

The regional pride theme is the major force in Lynyrd Skynyrd's Southern popularity. By 1975 this theme had enabled Lynyrd Skynyrd to overpower the Allman Brothers Band and to become the top draw in the Dixie rock structure. Several critics have claimed that Lynyrd Skynyrd was the most Southern-acting of all the Southern rock bands of that era. Lynyrd Skynyrd "fit neatly into the whole deep south spectrum alongside fried chicken, Mississippi river boats and the Alamo" (Kirb; Point; Harrigan).

Lynyrd Skynyrd's regional pride theme is evident in the band's concerts, album covers, and musical lyrics. A typical Lynyrd Skynyrd concert, for example, began with the song "Dixie" being blasted over the loud speakers. A huge Confederate flag would then be unfurled behind the stage before the band aggressively invaded the platform and began performing. In numerous Southern locations the audience would respond to this obvious display of regional pride, by widely waving Confederate flags. Although this type of regional pride found an enthusiastic welcome in the rural South, not every place, particularly Northern cities, approved of such antics. A case in point happened in 1974 when Lynyrd Skynyrd performed in Long Island, New York. The Confederate flag was unfurled behind the stage even though the band was aware that Northern urban audiences did not always admire this particular flag. As usual, the group hurdled itself onto the stage, but instead of hearing rebel yells, it found itself being saluted with "a hail of bottles and other hard objects," while everyone booed and chanted "Rebs, Rebs." Although this had happened on other occasions, Van Zant insisted that the band members would continue the practice because they were "just proud of being from the South and we like to show it." Therefore, when the band encountered such behavior, Van Zant would often "just dig in and get on playing" (Ibid.).

The jacket is an essential component of all albums, and Lynyrd Skynyrd's regional pride theme can be found on several of the band's album covers. Christopher Austopchuk, an album jacket designer, stated that when designing an album for a "hot group or

4. After reading numerous works on Southern history and after many years of personal observation, I know that Southern society did coerce its youths to utilize negative cultural traits, especially violence.

performer," there is a "big budget"; consequently, "a lot" of people think about what sells and have an "input," because "there is a lot at stake." Lynyrd Skynyrd was no exception to that rule, because both the band and MCA understood that the use of Southern symbolism sold albums. In Lynyrd Skynyrd's seventh album, entitled *Skynyrd's First And . . . Last*, several photographs inside the gatefold cover denote regional pride. In one photo Van Zant is wearing a shirt which reads Georgia loves Carter. This may seem like a simple gesture until people realize that Carter's "style" was viewed by Southerners as "solidly in the Southern tradition." As sociologist John Shelton Reed stated, Southern politics has the same tendencies as the phenomenon political scientist V. O. Key called the "friends and neighbors" vote. In other words, Southerners will often support someone, regardless of their political affiliations, if they are from the South. This issue of regional pride intermixing with politics was clearly reflected in the "crucial opening stages" of Carter's 1976 presidential campaign, when numerous Southern rock bands came to his aid. In fact, many bands gave concerts and donated the proceeds to Carter's war chest. This cannot be viewed lightly, because these funds furnished Carter with "indispensable" support in the early primaries.⁵

Another photograph on this particular gatefold cover symbolizes regional pride by displaying Rossington and Van Zant holding up a cake with a Confederate flag iced upon its top. Rossington is even proudly pointing to the flag. Similarly, two large photographs (which almost take up the entire cover) depict concert crowds waving enormous Confederate flags.⁶

The band's eighth album entitled *Gold & Platinum* contains drawings within the inside gatefold cover which also symbolize regional pride. On this particular album's inside cover all of the illustrations are drawn in stick figure form. The band members appear on a stage before a huge Confederate flag, which dominates the album cover. Similarly, the band's album entitled *One More From The Road* extensively utilized Confederate memorabilia.⁷

On the band's album entitled *Best Of The Rest* the Southern theme is extremely apparent. The entire front cover is dominated by a cowboy skeleton, which has a Confederate flag tattooed on his arm bone. Furthermore, this skeleton is wearing a Confederate neckerchief. This same photograph appeared on the band's *Gimme Back My Bullets* album. This latter album's cover also pictured Van Zant wearing another Southern symbol, a Confederate Civil War hat, which became such a widely known trademark of Van Zant that it was spotlighted on an empty microphone during the Rossington-Collins tribute tour.⁸

5. Reese 48; Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Skynyrd's First And . . . Last*; Reed, *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture* 181, 54; Malone 110.

6. See Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Skynyrd's First And . . . Last*.

7. See Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Gold & Platinum*; Lynyrd Skynyrd, *One More From The Road*.

8. Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Best of the Rest*; Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Gimme Back My Bullets*; Pareles, "Lynyrd Skynyrd Band Holds On To A Tradition."

Another of Lynyrd Skynyrd's albums, *Legend*, made use of the Confederate theme, by placing a huge picture of the stars and bars on its cover. *Southern By The Grace Of God* was a tribute album to Lynyrd Skynyrd put out in 1987 by the surviving band members and Jonnie Van Zant (Ronnie Van Zant's younger brother) that sports the Southern theme in its title as well as on the album cover. The front cover shows concert crowds pointing their hands toward a large Confederate flag that is being passed around.⁹

Lynyrd Skynyrd's music is a living history of the band. Lynyrd Skynyrd's music communicates the group's messages, its opinions and its ideas. Music allowed bands such as Lynyrd Skynyrd to involve themselves with Southerners. As other famous Southern rock musicians of this era have stated, the music these bands played was "like a mirror that just reflected what the youths of the South felt." The words of Lynyrd Skynyrd's music replicated the images, the expressions and the language of Southern white males.¹⁰

When analyzing the music of this group, it becomes obvious that several songs revolved around the regional pride theme. Neil Spencer, a rock critic for the *New Musical Express*, stated that Lynyrd Skynyrd flaunted its "southern pedigree on several cuts" of its second album, *Second Helping*. Although some critics, especially foreign reviewers, claimed this "preoccupation with the supposed greatness of the American South," hindered Lynyrd Skynyrd, Southern audiences relished the group's pride in its home region. Although many songs center on the theme of regional pride, Lynyrd Skynyrd's most popular song, "Sweet Home Alabama," is typical. Not only does this particular song demonstrate regional pride, it brings out another corresponding Southern trait. This is a regional characteristic which John Shelton Reed has termed the theme of "I'm as good as you," so don't criticize me.¹¹

The tune "Sweet Home Alabama," was a musical answer to Neil Young's song about the South, "Southern Man." In his song Young portrayed the Southern male as a racist. Moreover, the South is depicted as a place of either "white mansions" or "little shacks," where "screams" are heard and "bull whips" crack. Young warns white Southern males that they had "better keep" their "head" and "don't forget what your good book says," because "Southern change gonna come at last, now your crosses are burning fast, Southern men." This song sent shock waves throughout the South, and Lynyrd Skynyrd jumped on the band wagon with "Sweet Home Alabama," a song that has been called everything from "a militant hymn of praise to the state and its famous governor, George Wallace," to a vindication for

9. Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Legend*; Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Southern By The Grace Of God*. It is also interesting to note that when the band's material was released on CD, the Confederate flag still appeared on the front covers. In fact, on some CD covers instead of only being part of the picture, the flag was actually placed in a prominent location by itself.

10. Pat Daugherty, ex-member Black Oak Arkansas; interview by author.

11. Spencer, "Albums: Skinning Skynyrd" 16; "Lynyrd Skynyrd" 1197; Reed, *One South* 171.

the "thousands of kids who were wondering why they didn't feel guilty about loving life in the Deep South."¹²

This rock 'n' roll melody soon became the unofficial anthem of the South. The song became so popular with Southerners that Wallace made Lynyrd Skynyrd's members honorary lieutenant colonels in the Alabama state militia, a title that had never before been given to any rock star. "Sweet Home Alabama" was popular with Southerners for several reasons. First, the lyrics inform everyone that the band misses its Southern home, the South's music, and all its Southern "kin." Furthermore, Lynyrd Skynyrd took a militant tone when it screamed out "Well, I heard Mister Young sing about her. Well, I heard ole Neil put her down. Well, I hope Neil Young will remember, A Southern man don't need him around anyhow." In addition, Van Zant tells the nation that maybe the South has some problems, but "we all did what we could do." According to Van Zant, who wrote the lyrics, he was trying to encourage the rest of the United States to look at itself first, before it condemned the South. Because "Sweet Home Alabama" spoke of regional pride, sold-out Southern arena crowds went wild when they heard Van Zant sneer out the final line "A Southern man don't need him around anyhow." One such mob at Georgia Tech's coliseum was so frenzied that the "electricity almost became visible and the entire coliseum exploded in a triumphant roar. Our boys! they screamed."¹³

In addition to regional pride, the South cultivated another cultural trait—violence—and it coerced many Southern musicians to exhibit that quality in order to be culturally accepted. Lynyrd Skynyrd's reputation as an "intense drinking" and hard "fighting" band characterized what the early 1970's "Southern music phenomenon [was] all about." Van Zant admitted that "the boys in the band booze and fight a lot." He even stated that when "you're tense and uptight it's just natural to fight." Violence became so ingrained in the band, that savagery became a "hobby." A hobby which caused the group to act "like a wet, sputtering stick of dynamite with a short fuse."¹⁴

When Lynyrd Skynyrd projected itself onto the musical scene as a gang of "hell-bent" men who enjoyed debauching themselves daily on "whiskey, women, guns, and drugs," they made their penchant for physical violence known. But because this "brawling" image was no hoax, the band "gathered devoted followers by the legion." Young Southern listeners perceived Lynyrd Skynyrd as "extension[s] of themselves." According to several prominent Southern historians, the South is a land of extreme violence, so Lynyrd Skynyrd's use of physical force did not ostracize the band, but endeared it to the culture. In fact, young

12. See Neil Young, 1970; Lynyrd Skynyrd, "Sweet Home Alabama," in *Second Helping*; Malone 111; Dupree.

13. Wiseman 20; Freedland 42; Lynyrd Skynyrd, "Sweet Home Alabama," in *Second Helping*; Dupree 14.

14. Swenson 42; Doherty; Uhelszki 49; Goldstein 51.

Southern males who thronged around Lynyrd Skynyrd saw the band as "larger-than-life cultural heroes" (Sievert 67; Swenson 42).

The members of Lynyrd Skynyrd exhibited violence in their concert performances as well as in their private lives. In 1976, for example, at a concert appearance in New York City's Beacon Theater, Leon Wilkeson smashed his guitar and tossed it into the audience. The debris severely cut the face of a young girl in the front row. Similarly, when Northern audiences booed the Confederate flag, Van Zant did not always "just dig in and get on playing." On at least on one occasion (in New York City) Van Zant assembled all his of Southern guitarists "on the lip of the stage, stuck out his street-fighter chest and dared the crowd to throw bottles at his boys" ("The Rotgut Life"; Glazer 18-20).

Unsurprising, several band members had violent histories. Lynyrd Skynyrd's founding even had "thug overtones." In 1965 Van Zant, who was known on the streets of Jacksonville as a tough "Mr. Badass," got himself selected as lead singer of the band US, because everyone was "too scared to say no." When Van Zant and Rossington wanted Collins to join them in a new band, Collins' old band (the Mods) threatened to beat him up, if he left. When Van Zant heard this, he and his "redneck friends" made sure the Mods understood who was the boss of the Jacksonville streets. In fact, when Van Zant took Collins and three car loads of his friends over to the Mods' band house, the group came outside and was going to beat Collins up, until they saw Van Zant. After they noticed the well known Jacksonville street fighter, the Mods quickly changed their mind and said "Hi, Allen, come on in and get your stuff" (Wiseman 20; Doherty).

In Lynyrd Skynyrd's zenith the band members continued to live by a code of violence, and brutality soon became the "main release" of the group. By 1976 Van Zant had accumulated 12 arrests, most of these were for fighting, but they ranged anywhere from attempted murder to drunk and disorderly conduct. In fact, 5 of these arrests occurred in 1975 alone. Van Zant's last arrest in 1975, for example, occurred in Hampton Roads, Virginia—when he obstructed a policeman who was attempting to arrest Powell for drinking outside. Other members had also been arrested for a wide variety of illegal activities. They had convictions ranging from assaulting police officers to possessing amphetamines. The band's penchant for physical violence could erupt at any time and at any place¹⁵ ("The Rotgut Life"; Uhelszki 49).

A case in point happened in 1975 when Artimus Pyle was denied a backstage pass at a Who concert (this is a common courtesy among all rock stars, but Pyle was mistakenly unrecognized). Instead of leaving the area as asked, the furious Pyle went wild and fought several policemen. When Pyle was finally brought under control, the police threw him in the Dade County Jail, with a black eye and "knocks all over his head." According to Tom Dowd, a famous record producer who was with the band when it heard of Pyle's arrest, Van

15. Van Zant was acquitted of the attempted murder charge. This charge was a result of a teenage street fight.

Zant was so infuriated by the news that he could hardly be kept under control, "if there had been a grenade around he would have eaten it" ("The Rotgut Life"; Glazer 19).

Moreover, Dowd claimed that Van Zant had a temper that was "terrifying" when it "explodes." In 1974 Van Zant let his terrifying anger explode when he viciously slugged a Mexican-American, who had "invited himself on the bus for a look." Instead of letting the fight rest when the man got off the bus, Van Zant followed him outside and continued to brutally beat him, until a group of his "black and Chicano friends" intervened. When this battle finally ended, both Van Zant and Rossington lay in a "bloody heap."¹⁶

Similarly, Lynyrd Skynyrd fought management. Van Zant had a fist fight with one of the biggest concert promoters of all time, Bill Graham. When making its first album the band "stood up" to its producer and refused to be his "guinea pig" like Kooper's first Southern band, Moses Jones. Kooper often felt the wrath of Van Zant because he was considered a "Yankee slick." On at least one occasion Van Zant was so angry at Kooper, over a sound mixing problem, that the latter had to hurriedly leave the studio because Van Zant was "ready to beat the shit out" of him at any moment. When Kooper told Van Zant that he could not record "Simple Man" on a album, Van Zant took him "outside to the parking lot and told him to get in his car and leave, or else."¹⁷

This violent behavior was not only reserved for "outsiders," because the band members commonly brawled with each other. The group held firm to a tacit unwritten rule, that is, if one member had trouble with another, they "simply take it outside and settle it." According to Van Zant, this type of violent behavior "usually ends . . . with a few black eyes, etc." Van Zant, for example, once overheard Powell and the road manager fiercely arguing in the hallway of their motel and wished for quiet. When Van Zant stepped outside to tell the men to "cool it," Powell made the cardinal mistake of screaming "Fuck you" at Van Zant who then proceeded to knock out Powell's two front teeth. Unsatisfied, Van Zant then beat up the road manger. These types of fights were so common that on more than one occasion other famous musicians, such as Roger Daltrey, had to stop the band members from severely beating each other (Tolces; Wiseman 20).

Not only did Lynyrd Skynyrd use physical violence against people, the band destroyed inanimate objects. The band's bills for damages in 1976 averaged over \$1,000 a month and the road manager was forced to have a \$40,000 line of credit, and to carry \$2,000 cash, in case of "impromptu pillage." Impromptu pillage was not uncommon for Lynyrd Skynyrd. In 1975 the band destroyed over half of the Nashville's Spence Manor Hotel's exercise machines. A year later, in order to relieve tension and have "fun," Van Zant (while in Bristol, England) hurdled a heavy oak table out of his fifth floor hotel window. Similarly, when the Macon Hilton accidentally forgot to bring sugar for Pyle's order of iced

16. "The Rotgut Life"; Glazer 19, 20; Doherty 9; Wiseman 9.

17. Glazer 18-20; Swenson 45; Sievert 74. Kooper is referred to as a "Yankee slick" in the song "Working For MCA," from the album *Second Helping*. Moreover, in several articles band members described him as a Yankee.

tea, he went violently berserk. First, he destroyed the hotel's louvered doors. Next, he attempted to throw the television set out the window, and when it would not fit he "splintered everything else" inside the room. This violent behavior was so typical, that hotels in several major cities would not rent rooms to the band. The only place that would take the group when it performed in Atlanta, was a resort more than an hour's drive away from the city. Although fame and fortune have to an extent caused other rock bands to display this type of behavior, Van Zant and the other band member's violent early histories prove that these actions were not only childish deeds carried out by pampered super stars¹⁸ ("The Rotgut Life").

Lynyrd Skynyrd's electrifying performances often caused violence and general chaos to erupt at its concerts. A typical example occurred at what one rock critic called the "Weirdest rock" show he had ever seen. In 1975 at the Miami Marina, the crowd "rushed the barricades" after being told that the entrance was closed. It took a multitude of police officers and attack dogs to drive them back. After fist fights and several attempts by angry youths to flood the electrified stage with water (they were enraged at the stagehands' attempts to keep them off of the stage), this wild concert ended in confusion. Similarly, the next night's performance, at St. Petersburg, Florida, started with a few fights, some arrests, and a "crowd of cops with sticks raised for action." Instead of trying to calm the crowds, the band would let the fights continue because the type of Southern people Lynyrd Skynyrd attracted would simply say "f— you too," if Van Zant tried to pacify them (Swenson 43, 45; Doherty).

Lynyrd Skynyrd's Southern crowds were extremely wild and after listening to the band's form of Southern rock, they could hardly be kept under control. Van Zant, in 1976, pointed out that he expected the "audience to throw bottles and similar armory at them . . . [but] they then throw them back . . . that's what is called 'audience communication.'" In fact, the band became so used to this type of behavior that it laughed "like hell" when someone knocked Collins senseless with a boot. Van Zant knew that his music and behavior drew "all them rowdy b— [and] . . . A bunch of drunks." As one rock critic so correctly pointed out, "after a few beers and some reds out in the blazing Florida sun" the mob who listened to Lynyrd Skynyrd demonstrated that "fighting becomes a way of life" in the South. This becomes clearer when people realize that even 13 and 14 year-old Southern males attempted to challenge Van Zant backstage (Swenson 42; Doherty).

According to band members of other Southern groups, the Southern bar scene in which groups such as Lynyrd Skynyrd played, were hot-beds of violence. This rural bar circuit has been correctly labeled the "booze & brawl" route; therefore, the band had to be brutal in order to survive. Many of the band's promotional photos exemplified a typical Southerner whose temperament was prone to violence. Moreover, many of Lynyrd Skynyrd's album covers depicted a group of long-haired, denim clad, rough-looking men with

18. On the band's album entitled *One More From The Road* it bragged about trashing hotel rooms.

intimidating expressions. The band's 1975 album *Nuthin' Fancy*, for example, has a cover which not only shows a band that looks menacing, but band member Powell, in a symbolic gesture, is openly giving "the finger" to the whole world.¹⁹

The back cover on the band's 1976 album, *Gimme Back My Bullets*, shows the solemn band members, some with whiskey bottles in hand (a well-known bar weapon), standing outside a rough-looking tavern in what appears to be a stand-off with a sheriff. The officer seems ready for action since his coat has been taken off his pistol. Guns are also depicted in the band's *Best Of The Rest* LP, its *One More From The Road* record, and its *First And... Last* album. The record cover of the former is almost filled by a drawing of a pistol being held by a skeleton with its finger on the trigger. The gun is again giving the symbolic finger (which is coming out of its barrel) to the world. This same logo appears on the band's *Gimme Back My Bullets* album.²⁰

On the inside gatecover of the group's *First And . . . Last* album, some photographs depict "fun" gun play. In one photo, for example, a man has positioned a large pistol, with the hammer pulled back, between the eyes of Van Zant. While this is taking place, Rossington is force feeding Van Zant a bottle of rot-gut whiskey. Another snapshot depicted Rossington pointing a gun toward another man who is trying to protect himself. Guns also played a major part in Van Zant's early life. On several occasions firearms had been pulled on him. Similarly, when he was a kid he "f--- around with a gun. . . . [and] Blew a hole" through his leg (Doherty).

Several of Lynyrd Skynyrd's songs had violent themes. Its most "evocative" lyrics, were full of "snub-nosed, blood stained boast." Although there were many such songs, a few will suffice to support this claim. The song "Gimme Three Steps," for example, tells about a man who is in a bar with another man's "woman," when that woman's "lean, mean, big and bad" man walks in with "a gun in his hand." After this "bad" man threatens to kill everyone with his "forty-four," the targeted man somehow manages to escape. This song also shows how violence was a part of Van Zant's everyday life since it actually described one of his personal experiences. Van Zant was the targeted man "with the hair colored yellow," who barely escaped with this life.²¹

The violence theme appears in the lyrics of "You Got That Right" as well. This particular song tells about a singer (Van Zant) who can't settle down. Instead of ending up in an "old folk's home," this man would rather "drink and dance all night" and if it "comes to a fix," he was not "afraid to fight." Again the violence theme emerges in the lyrics of "Cheatin' Woman." In this song a man is outraged that his "woman" has "loved every man

19. Stanley Knight, Pat Daugherty (3 September 1989), Harvey Jett, ex-members of Black Oak Arkansas; individual interviews by author. Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Nuthin' Fancy*.

20. In addition to guns, knives, whiskey bottles and bullets can be seen on the band's album *One More From The Road*.

21. Goldstein 51; Doherty; Lynyrd Skynyrd, "Gimme Three Steps" (*Pronounced* 'leh-'nerd 'skin-'nerd).

with pants on." After he accuses her of making him "love your sister," this violent man claims that he is "gonna get my pistol girl. I'm gonna shoot you and end your world. Then you won't bother me no longer. Cheatin' woman-gonna shoot ya. . . . I'm gonna shoot you and all your pals." One of the most violent songs issued by Lynyrd Skynyrd was "Mississippi Kid." In this song a Mississippi man is going to Alabama with his "pistols" in his "pockets" to "fetch" his "woman." This violent man warns everybody that he was "born in Mississippi. And I don't take any stuff from you. And if I hit you on your head Boy, it's got to make you black and blue." When he "hits Alabama" he forewarns everyone "don't you try to dog him 'round. 'Cause if you people cause me trouble. Then I've got to put you in the ground." This song contains other similar violent lyrics, which are repeated throughout the song. This song even takes on more meaning, when people realize that Van Zant identified himself as the "Mississippi Kid." In fact, when Van Zant was asked in an interview why he was so "bad," he stated "because I am," and then he proceeded to sing the words to this particular song.²²

Lynyrd Skynyrd also enhanced its Southern popularity by utilizing the common man theme in its music. Several critics have pointed out that Lynyrd Skynyrd's "populist character," was one of the ingredients which gave the band "firepower." Rock critics, such as Chuck Eddy, even went so far as to claim that the group was the "greatest" rock "populists" of all time. Lynyrd Skynyrd spoke the language of the working man so effectively, that it left the other great rock populists, such as Bruce Springsteen, Bob Seger, and John Cougar Mellencamp, "in the dust." Lynyrd Skynyrd's songs like "Simple Man," "Gimme Back My Bullets," "Made In The Shade," and "I'm A Country Boy," all emphasized this theme. In the age of glitter rock, Lynyrd Skynyrd employed this theme in its concert performances. As *Variety* stated, the band's concert "style" was "unpretentious and common-man themed." The group felt it owed Southern fans more than stage props and theatrical costumes. Indeed, Southern fans were proud of Lynyrd Skynyrd because it became successful on its own musical ability and not on special effects.²³

Although throughout the band's music the themes of hard work, fighting, poverty, fervent partying, a simple existence, broken relationships (for a variety of reasons such as lack of money, pregnancy, and/or adultery,) whiskey, friendship, and other themes (that were commonplace in the lives of the average Southern male) reappeared time and time again. Another Southern trait, romanticism, intermixed with these themes. As *Rolling Stone* rock critic Dave Marsh so accurately stated, the band's music was "about simple pleasures and

22. Lynyrd Skynyrd: "You Got That Right" (*Street Survivors*), "Cheatin' Woman" (*Nuthin' Fancy*), "Mississippi Kid" (*Pronounced leh-'nerd 'skin-'nerd*); Uhelszki 49.

23. Scoppa; Eddy, "Lynyrd Skynyrd: Legend"; Lynyrd Skynyrd: "Simple Man" (*Pronounced leh-'nerd 'skin-'nerd*), "Give Me Back My Bullets" (*Gimme Back My Bullets*), "Made In The Shade" (*Nuthin' Fancy*), "I'm A Country Boy" (*Nuthin' Fancy*); Rome, "Concert Reviews: Lynyrd Skynyrd, Nazareth"; Kubernik 8.

grim problems, but if the songs are realistic, a romantic's vision has shaped that reality." The song "Was I Right or Wrong," for example, which was written by Van Zant even before he had a record contract, was a tune of such "archetypal starkness," that it was "hard to believe" that it was only a "Fantasy." In fact, this melody used the fact-fantasy combination so successfully that Marsh claimed it can only be compared to Bruce Springsteen's "Adam Raised a Cain." The song "Saturday Night Special's . . . temptingly erotic imagery romanticizes road-house revenge with chilling effectiveness."²⁴

Lynyrd Skynyrd also appeals to Southerners because it is a typical example of a "victim-hero." As John Shelton Reed points out, Southerners can excuse men, such as Hank Williams and Elvis Presley, who destroy themselves in "manly" ways, but not those who ruin themselves because they are too stupid, too gentle, or too lazy. Lynyrd Skynyrd fits this manly mode, because it often flirted with death. This issue becomes clearer when people understand that every band member had separately been involved in several horrifying automobile accidents. In analyzing the song "That Smell," (a song that depicts Collins' grisly car wreck) critics argue that the band members understood their destructive lifestyles and constant touring would finally kill them. In fact, in a 1976 interview Van Zant stated that whiskey was destroying his body and burning his voice out. Moreover, he claimed that he did not "expect to live very long, because I'm living too fast." In another 1976 interview Van Zant even made light of the band's many brushes with death. When King and Burns left Lynyrd Skynyrd because of the excesses, Van Zant didn't seem to care. He stated that the next tour would be even wilder than ever. As a matter of fact, Van Zant was "bettin' to see who goes next," and blows his "50 amp fuse," like Burns did. The average Southern male idolized this type of man, because of his rough and careless ways. For Lynyrd Skynyrd the "manly" excesses were, sex, sin, whiskey, violence, fast cars, and drugs all mixed together into a formidable brew.²⁵

The Southern cultural traits of regional pride, violence, populism, romanticism and admiration of the "victim-hero," combined with the power of rock 'n' roll and the band's musical superiority, assisted the group in its attempts to endear itself to the youth culture of the South. As Lynyrd Skynyrd's popularity grew, the media focused on the group's Southern traits, especially its violent behavior and its regional pride; thus, the media constructed a Southern lore around the group. Lynyrd Skynyrd responded by identifying with the average young Southerner. As has been shown, the band's lyrics and album covers, for example, stressed Southern themes. In addition, Lynyrd Skynyrd's brutal history and

24. Marsh; Goldstein 51; Lynyrd Skynyrd: "Was I Right or Wrong" (*Skynyrd's First And . . . Last*), "Saturday Night Special" (*Nuthin' Fancy*).

25. Reed, *Southern Folk, Plain & Simple* 47. A short list of some of the automobile accidents include: Powell suffered broken bones and internal injuries in a motorcycle wreck; Pyle slammed his car into the side of a mountain; Rossington hit a tree with his vehicle, then ran it though a garage; Collins fractured his skull when he drove off a bridge; and Van Zant had had many wrecks. Uhelszki 50, 69; Goldstein 51; Doherty.

Southern speech gave the band credibility; and when a musical group has believability, it has the capacity to influence audiences with its messages (Irvine and Kirkpatrick).

What were the messages Lynyrd Skynyrd was trying to promote? To claim that Lynyrd Skynyrd was a Southern liberal band that fought "for gun-control from the bed of a four-wheel-drive pickup," and that somehow it turned "a mirror on prejudiced liberal hypocrites," is wrong. Although the group did have one anti-gun song, "Saturday Night Special," that does not place it into the category of anti-gun since, as has been shown, many of the band's photographs and lyrics imply that guns are honorable. Lynyrd Skynyrd also had an anti-drug song ("That Smell") and an anti-alcohol song ("Poison Whiskey"), but the band was clearly not promoting anti-drugs or anti-alcohol messages any more than it was promoting an anti-gun message. Furthermore, nothing in the band's music and/or lifestyles indicate that it was a mouthpiece for the counter culture movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁶

The key to understanding Lynyrd Skynyrd can be found by looking at the era in Southern history in which the band flourished. This was an era in which many scholars were claiming that the distinct character of the South was either completely dead or quickly dying. At the same time, however, this was the period in which "Southern Rock" swept over the Southern states and became a "distinctive and rhetorical genre." Since Southern rock music is "a living image of Southern culture; a fusion of the varied and sometimes antagonistic elements of Southern life," several questions arise. Was rock music one of the vehicles that inspired this generation of "proud, often resentful young Southerners" who longed for the Old South's self-gratifying romantic myths? Was Lynyrd Skynyrd an outlet for young white Southern males, after they and the rest of the nation began to question whether the Southern image was more "smoke than fire?" Moreover, by using Southern "gimmicks" were MCA and Lynyrd Skynyrd trying to keep regionalism alive? In an era when Southerners were no longer confident that their myths were built upon solid social realities, did Lynyrd Skynyrd epitomize what Pulitzer Prize winning syndicated columnist Edwin M. Yoder, Jr. termed a "southernizing enterprise" that flirted with "obscurantism and self-caricature?" Had the South become a land where its spokespersons had to Dixify Dixie? Was Lynyrd Skynyrd the South's "stage-prop front on a mercurial reality?"²⁷

First, Southern rock bands of this era, especially Lynyrd Skynyrd, not only contained "elements of the often-abrasive braggadocio of many of the region's residents," but these bands incorporated the "fears and mythos and chauvinism" of the South. For example, when Lynyrd Skynyrd championed the violence theme, it provided "a justification as well as a medium for what is a normal form of self-expression" in the South. In fact,

26. Eddy, "Lynyrd Skynyrd: Legend"; Marsh; Lynyrd Skynyrd: "Saturday Night Special" (*Nuthin' Fancy*), "That Smell" (*Street Survivors*), "Poison Whiskey" (*Pronounced leh-'nerd 'skin-'nerd*).

27. Charlesworth; Smith 104-105; Bane; Malone 111; Pareles, "Lynyrd Skynyrd: Beacon Theater"; Yoder.

these types of Southern bands were mirrors "that just reflected what the youth of the South felt." Moreover, this band escalated to the top of the Southern rock scene because it represented "the voice of good ole boys getting riled by the modern world." Therefore, through its music and actions Lynyrd Skynyrd must be seen as a panacea for the white Southern males who thought their region had lost its distinctness.²⁸

Secondly, Southern rock bands, particularly Lynyrd Skynyrd, must be viewed as major forces behind the rejuvenation of old Southern myths. When, for example, the South of the late 1960s and early 1970s was forced to seek a "new mythology to interpret and explain the new social and cultural realities of the contemporary South," Lynyrd Skynyrd dismissed progressivism and instead reverted to the old symbolism of the past. The new Southern mythmakers were liberal and its messengers, which were the upper-middle-class professionals, called for new symbols which would "redefine the past," and shape a new reality based on racial equality (Smith 133; 138).

The old Southern struggle between rural agrarianism and urban industrialism was redefined by these progressives in order to make Southerners believe that their sense of place could "coexist with the forces of demographic change and economic development," that was occurring all around them in the early 1970s. Similarly, this new breed of tolerant Southerners redefined the meaning of regional distinctiveness, in order to incorporate new "heroes." More egalitarian themes accompanied this new definition of the South. While these changes were occurring, however, Lynyrd Skynyrd held to old Southern symbolism (Smith 138-139; 141).

It is extremely important to realize that the band members of Lynyrd Skynyrd were lower class white males; therefore, their experiences and their attitudes were drastically different from the new professional progressives. Understandably, the band's music did not generally appeal to the progressives. The Southern "pseudo-intellectual circles," for instance, hated "rebel boogie," and associated it with "quaaludes," a trademark name for the sedative methaqualone. But as rock journalist Chet Flippo pointed out, groups such as the Allman Brothers Band (this can also be applied to Lynyrd Skynyrd) finally gave "kids in the South . . . cultural heroes of their own." Lynyrd Skynyrd's music was not the music of progressives, it was more the music of the barroom brawlers. Like the Allman Brothers songs, Lynyrd Skynyrd's music owed more "to the dirt poor arrogance and wet-tar endurance of the Snopes," than it did to the "aristocratic charm of Faulkner's Sutpen clan." Since, as historian Stephen A. Smith pointed out, "multiple and competing myths" can coexist, what illusions, if not of the new progressive kind, did these lower class cultural heroes encourage their Southern audiences to accept?²⁹

28. Smith 105; Swenson 42; Pat Daugherty (ex-member Black Oak Arkansas), interview by author; Pareles, "Lynyrd Skynyrd Band Holds On To A Tradition."

29. Shaw 64; Chet Flippo 34-37; Ibid., 75; Goldstein 51; Smith 142. The Snopes were blue-collar workers (nearly what Southerners would term "White Trash"). The Sutpens were a more aristocratic blood-line in William Faulkner's novels.

Lynyrd Skynyrd's illusions of the past and present were dissimilar to the liberals' interpretation. First, the new Southern progressives "undermined the ideology of white supremacy and the social structure" it supported, by including "black heroes" in its message "for the first time in Southern history." In contrast, although Lynyrd Skynyrd's music stressed the common man theme, this was the white man; African-Americans are never positively mentioned in its lyrics, nor are they ever shown on its albums, or discussed in its interviews. Although the song "The Ballad of Curtis Loew" was a tune which mentioned African-Americans, it was the only such Lynyrd Skynyrd song. African-Americans were not necessarily depicted positively in this song. For example, even though Van Zant pointed out that Loew was the "finest guitar picker to ever play the blues," he was a wino. Loew drank a lot while playing and when he had a "fifth of wine," he did not have a "care." Loew was also depicted as a man whom your mother would not want you to visit. Nobody cared when this old man passed away, because he lived his life playing the "black man's blues," and when he died "that's all he had to lose." On one level this does seem like a positive song because it depicts Loew as a great blues guitarist and claims that everyone who thought he was useless was a fool, yet on another level this song reinforces old stereotypes about African-Americans, mainly that they have no ambition. Finally, in a 1988 interview, band member Wilkeson pointed out Lynyrd Skynyrd's type of "red neck" image "didn't even mention blacks."³⁰

If Lynyrd Skynyrd's definition of the common man is examined closely, historians will find it fits precisely into the old South tradition. The band's common man is basically the same person Daniel R. Hundley described in his 1860 book, *Social Relations in Our South*. John Shelton Reed argues that when Southern musicians, such as Charlie Daniels, Hank Williams Jr., and Merle Haggard, speak of the common man, it is basically the Southern Yeomanry of the antebellum South. This also holds true for Lynyrd Skynyrd, because its common man was, like Hundley's, "Nearly always poor, at least so far as this world's goods are to be taken into account." His only "inheritance . . . is the ability and the will to earn an honest livelihood . . . by the toilsome sweat of their own brows." Similarly, Hundley's and Skynyrd's common man exhibited "a manly independence of character." In other words, he will not "under any circumstances humiliate himself to curry favor with the rich or those in authority." These are working class heroes.³¹

30. Smith 141; Lynyrd Skynyrd, "The Ballad of Curtis Loew" (*Second Helping*); Rowland. By definition Loew can not be considered a "Victim-Hero" like Lynyrd Skynyrd. First, he did not destroy himself in a manly way. In Southern culture there is a difference between a wino and a whiskey soaked man, as one would expect, whiskey is seen as a more manly drink. Similarly, Loew set himself up to be mistreated by other, this is what Southerners have "traditionally regarded . . . as the providential destiny of blacks, and of women." See Reed, *Southern Folk* 47.

31. Haggard was one of Van Zant's heroes, whose song "Honkey Tonk Nighttime man" appeared on Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Street Survivorm*. See Shaw 64; Reed, *Southern Folk* 34.

Although many songs display these tendencies, Lynyrd Skynyrd's song "Simple Man," is typical. In this song, a poor Southern boy stated that his mother had told him a "simple life" meant more than all the "rich man's gold"; therefore, he should not "lust" after their riches. Instead he was advised to work hard, believe in God, take his time, "find love," and strive for self-satisfaction and self-understanding. In the end, if he followed her advice, hard times would pass, and he would obtain the best gift of all, satisfaction. This song takes on more meaning when people realize that this tune represents Van Zant's own view of life—a belief which his grandmother instilled in him. In fact, although Van Zant stated the money he made enabled him to take care of his extended family, he claimed he was not rich because to him being rich meant staying home, having kids, and watching football.³²

Lynyrd Skynyrd stressed the value of rural life rather than redefining the old struggle between rural agrarianism and urban industrialism, as the new myth makers attempted to do. The band relied heavily upon the old prejudices. The lyrics of "I'm A Country Boy" especially emphasized this theme. In this song, a rural youth asserted that he did not care that New York City was "a thousand miles away." This Southern boy did not need anything urban industrialism had to offer him. Unsurprisingly, this song pointed out the ugly side of industrialism, when it spoke of the smokey air, the bad smells, the "hard times," the "cars buzzin' around," the concrete, and the "city folks" who "don't care." In contrast, rural life is portrayed as full of "sunshine" and "fresh clean air." The rural lifestyle made this "country boy" as "happy" as he "could be," even though he picked "cotton down on the Dixie line," and worked "all day tryin' to make a dime," because "that's the way it was supposed to be." In Lynyrd Skynyrd's music rural life was seen as simple but beautiful while urbanism was viewed as chaotic, and unpleasant. Furthermore, this music stressed the theme that urban centers did not want agrarian people, and rural people did not need urbanization in order to be happy. Since the Southern themes and/or ideas Lynyrd Skynyrd stressed were not actually part of modern Southern reality, especially the suggestion that rural Southern boys still hand picked cotton in an age of mechanical cotton pickers, the band must be seen as a "southernizing enterprise" that attempted to Dixify Dixie.³³

If Lynyrd Skynyrd was not part of the progress movement, what was it? First, as has been shown, Lynyrd Skynyrd was a band that emphasized regional pride. But the way the band demonstrated that pride must be examined because the symbols it used illustrate how Lynyrd Skynyrd fits into the historiography of the modern South. The band must be seen as part of the movement which stressed the Dixification of Dixie. Although in 1976 the band generally quit using its enormous Confederate flag as a backdrop on stage (except on European tours, and concert dates in Southern cities), had stopped playing "Dixie" as an opening number, and claimed that the flag and "Dixie" were only an "MCA gimmick to start us off with some identity label," that is the image Lynyrd Skynyrd was known for

32. Lynyrd Skynyrd, "Simple Man" (*Pronounced* leh-'nerd 'skin-'nerd); Doherty 9; Uhelszki 70.

33. Lynyrd Skynyrd, "I'm A Country Boy" (*Nuthin' Fancy*).

throughout its career. Even after the band perished in 1977, MCA still issued several Lynyrd Skynyrd albums on which the Confederate flag played a major role. Similarly, Southerners who attended the tribute tours claimed that MCA still heavily stressed the group's Southern heritage. As shown earlier Southern symbols and themes, such as the stars and bars, the song "Dixie," and the Confederate wardrobe, were used extensively by Lynyrd Skynyrd in its lyrics, its publicity photos, its interviews, its videos, its movie, its album covers, and its concerts.³⁴

In order to clearly understand Lynyrd Skynyrd's message, its audiences' preconceptions, and the band's influence upon Southern history, students of Southern social and cultural history first must understand what Lynyrd Skynyrd's two most prominent trademark symbols, the Confederate flag and "Dixie," symbolized to Southerners. According to historian Kevin Pierce Thornton, in order to understand this Southern phenomenon scholars must first examine where these symbols originated. In examining the ultra-Southern institution of Ole Miss, Thornton found that these two symbols did not appear in the South until the late 1940s (first at the 1948 Dixiecrat rebellion) when the South was facing major crises brought on by both racial strains and post-World War II social and economic changes. These changes indicated to white supremacists that the "southern way of life was suddenly questionable." The flag and the song, therefore, were symbols of a "mystic view of a glorious regional past." As the turbulent 1960s affected the South, this symbolism at Ole Miss again "reinforced an identity associated with white supremacy." In the decade of the 1970's too, when white Southerners were again questioned and challenged, Lynyrd Skynyrd used these same symbols to glorify the old myths (Thornton 259; 263).

According to the prominent philosophy professor Susanne Langer, "many symbols" (such as the cross) are "Charged with meanings." These charged symbols have many "symbolic and specific functions," which have been "integrated into a complex so that they are all apt to be sympathetically invoked with any chosen one." Two of the most "charged" symbols in Southern history are the Confederate flag and "Dixie." Among other things, this flag symbolizes "southern origin, the Ku Klux Klan, and the generalized attitude of rebellion." Although Lynyrd Skynyrd asserted that its use of "Dixie" and the Confederate flag were gimmicks and/or demonstrations that showed it was "just proud of being from the South," the group, like the University of Mississippi, could not associate these symbols selectively. Ole Miss could not, for example, claim that their Confederate flag was the flag of the "glorious 1960 football season but not the flag that waved during the Meredith riots two years later." Similarly, the band could not disassociate itself from the popular meaning of this "charged" symbol. In fact, Van Zant admitted that Southern politicians, such as George Wallace, had managed to tie Lynyrd Skynyrd "up in politics . . . [and that they]

34. See Freedland. Ed Hamelrath, a Mississippi man who had attended the tribute tour, informed me that the band continually displayed the Confederate flag. Similarly, he claimed that audience members also waved "a lot of flags" (interview by author). A short movie, which played in theaters, was released after the plane crash.

really exploited" the band. Therefore, no matter what it claimed, Lynyrd Skynyrd's flag still had the same meanings as the ones waved during racial disputes of that era.³⁵

What does this "charged" symbol represent to a large population of the Southern states, the African-Americans? Earl Shinhoster, the NAACP's southeast regional director, claimed that even though a lot of people refused to acknowledge that the flag was a sign of division, and was only "paraded by "good ole boys" like the TV characters on "The Dukes of Hazzard," or by youths rebelling against authority," it was still "distasteful to black people," because it represented a nation that fought for slavery. Shinhoster also noted that the flag still represented "silent racism." Mark Halton, columnist for the *Christian Century*, maintained that if people have forgotten the flag's association with racism, they need to be shown film clips of the civil rights marches of the 1960's." Therefore, when Lynyrd Skynyrd used such "charged" symbols to sell albums, pack arenas, and promote its Southern heritage, the band not only stressed regional pride, it fostered silent racism. When the concert crowds widely waved their Confederate flags, Lynyrd Skynyrd was at the head of a mob that emphasized much more than regional pride (Halton).

The song "Sweet Home Alabama," has racial undertones for some people. In fact, when speaking on the issue of Wallace's obvious pleasure with the song, Lynyrd Skynyrd failed to clarify its stand on the race issue. Although at times the band claimed it did not admire Wallace's political views, it also maintained that it was not "totally down" on the Alabama governor either. Moreover, in 1975 Van Zant admitted that several band members would support Wallace's presidential campaign "if it got off the ground." In fact, an Alabama state press aide claimed that Lynyrd Skynyrd received the honorary titles of lieutenant colonels because of its "declared willingness to assist the Governor should he, er, require their assistance, to raise funds on college campuses, say." Wilkeson even stated that he and all the band members "respect[ed]" Wallace, "as a man who hasn't given up what he was after." When Lynyrd Skynyrd claimed that it supported Wallace, but it was not racially prejudiced, the band was being contradictory, especially when people consider that Wallace stood for "old-time red-neck rousers." Governor Wallace was a "glaring exception" to the "newer theme" of Southern progressivism, business-like governors, and black office-holders. Moreover, even though Van Zant sometimes maintained that the song "Sweet Home Alabama" expressed the band's dislike for Wallace, because it stated "In Birmingham they love the Governor. Boo boo boo," at other times he implied that the words "Boo boo boo" were really said sarcastically. Of course, Lynyrd Skynyrd did not invent the racial problems of the 1970's, but it must share a large responsibility for sanctioning and reinforcing the ideas for so many.³⁶

Although Lynyrd Skynyrd propelled Southern rock into the American mainstream and was the "only Southern band capable of retaining the interest of, say, a New Yorker strong on Bad Company," this had negative repercussions for Southerners. First, as several

35. Thornton 264; Harrigan 8; Goldstein 53.

36. Wiseman 20; Christgau 73; 25; Kirby 162; Campbell 190.

historians and sociologists have indicated, the South is a region that has been branded with many negative stereotypes. These stereotypes, which were kept alive by the literature of the nineteenth century and the mass media of the twentieth century, continue to haunt Southerners. Scholars have shown that "poor Southern whites . . . have not been lucky in their portraiture." Most lower class Southerners, for example, are usually seen as "redneck brutes," or "figures of fun." Even if the media gives this group sympathetic treatment, it is "condescending or self-serving." Although this type of negative stereotyping was reinforced by the mass media in several ways, it will suffice to mention only a few of the more popular television sitcoms of the late 1960's and the 1970's. Included in this group would be such television shows as, "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Mayberry RFD," "Hee Haw," "Green Acres," "Gomer Pyle," "The Dukes of Hazzard," and "Carter Country." Similarly, movies, such as "Easy Rider," and "Deliverance" also reinforced these negative stereotypes (Point 44-45).

What does this mean to Southern culture, and how does Lynyrd Skynyrd fit into this historical picture? Some sociologists claim that negative stereotyping is part of "cultural imperialism" or, worse yet, "the most intensive effort ever exerted by a nation to belittle, demean, or otherwise destroy a minority people within its boundaries." Although Lynyrd Skynyrd attempted to pass itself off as a group of Southern good ole boys, the definition of a redneck fits Lynyrd Skynyrd more accurately. There is an important distinction between these two social types, that Southerners understand. According to author/editor Roy Blount Jr., (and through my own personal observations) a good ole boy is a man who is a "solid, reliable, unpretentious, stand-up, companionable, appropriately loose, joke-sharing feller, with a working understanding of certain bases of head-to-head equal footing." He is a Jerry Reed, Burt Reynolds, and Richard Petty type of man. Although a good ole boy will fight, he does not relish it. A redneck on the other hand, is a man who loves to fight, he hangs around a tavern too much, he drinks too much rot-gut, he generally has a foul mouth, he is intolerant of others, and, more importantly, he has "an outlaw quality that the good ole boy lacks." David Allen Coe, Johnny Paycheck, and Hank Williams Jr. are three examples (Point 45; 36; 38).

Even though Lynyrd Skynyrd's members usually claimed they were not rednecks, on some occasions the truth surfaced. In 1976, for example, *Creem* rock critic Jaan Uhelszki stated that Rossington revealed to her in "all sincerity" that he was indeed a redneck. In fact, he professed that "I was born and brought up that way, and I still am a redneck, to this very day. . . . I just grew my hair long so it would cover my red neck." The band fits the popular image of a Southern redneck in a variety of ways. First, the "charged" symbols the band employed denoted intolerance for others. These symbols are typically associated with rednecks in the South. Second, as has been shown, several of the band's songs and album covers glorified violence. The band's song lyrics also exemplify violence. The lyrics to "Mississippi Kid," for example, romanticized an archetypal redneck. Although rednecks use violence against all segments of society, women especially take a majority of their abuse. By examining the lyrics to Lynyrd Skynyrd's music, it becomes clear that violence toward women was romanticized. If your "woman" committed adultery, for instance, or ran away, it was fine to kill her, or to physically bring her back. Furthermore, critics pointed out that

the themes of "fear and loathing, fights and rot-gut liquor," consistently appeared in the band's music (Uhelszki 48; Goldstein 50).

The redneck image can be observed in the bands' lifestyles as well. Van Zant's early "Mr. Badass" thug attitude, his "redneck friends'" violent deeds, the band's many internal and external fights, and the group's total intolerance of others, all dismiss the myth that Lynyrd Skynyrd was not a bunch of redneck ruffians. Even though at the height of its career the band constantly claimed that it was not a group of rednecks, it was. Wilkeson even stated in 1981 that Lynyrd Skynyrd utilized a "Southern redneck image"—an image that portrayed all the band members as "Southern, hell-raising, heathen free-for-all, kill-ya-as-soon-as-look-at-ya-type Hells Angels figures." Lynyrd Skynyrd exploited this so effectively that it became known as the "leading practitioners of redneck rock." Therefore, like so many other things in this band's history, no matter what Lynyrd Skynyrd claimed, its songs, its messages, its photographs, and its actions spoke louder than its assertions (Rowland; Wiseman 20).

Since Lynyrd Skynyrd and MCA stressed, in lyrics, album covers, promotional photographs, everyday lifestyles, concerts, and interviews, several redneck stereotypes, the band must be viewed as major reinforcers of this negative Southern myth. This becomes clearer if one realizes that MCA had the means to instill that stereotypical image into the national mind-set, because, at the height of Lynyrd Skynyrd's success, MCA was one of the dozen organizations that exercised the most control over all forms of the American media. Because Lynyrd Skynyrd utilized several major forms of the mass media, including movies, videos, concerts, records, television, posters, and radio, the stereotypical image of the redneck Southern white male was strengthened throughout the nation (Monaco 305).

The band fostered another negative image by depicting the South as a land full of hard times and cotton. Lynyrd Skynyrd was contradictory when it accused Neil Young of being a promoter of this "outdated image." Although in an interview Van Zant claimed it was a regional stereotype for Neil Young to sing the words "I've Seen Cotton," and even though Van Zant proclaimed that he would never "disgrace" the South by giving people the wrong impression of the region, he did the same thing. Van Zant, for example, used the term "picking cotton" in some of his own songs. Van Zant reinforced this myth even further by claiming that when he quit school he realized that he had better keep playing music "no matter how tough things got," because the only other "job I'd be able to get was chopping cotton," and/or picking cotton. Moreover, by examining the popular journal articles on the band, one can detect that many were assigned stereotypical titles. Two such article titles included "Tiptoeing Through The Juleps," and "Dixie Flyers." Several of these articles also stressed an old view of the South. The whole South, for example, appeared to be a run-down region, that was full of cracked paint, dusty roads, and moonshine (Kubernik; Freedland; Uhelszki 70).

The Southern intellectual's worst nightmare became reality in the early 1970's, because Lynyrd Skynyrd was a "self-caricature" of the Southern male, the group had become that feared "stage-prop front on a mercurial reality," that was pushed by outside forces. As rock critic Neil Rowland so accurately stated, the development of Lynyrd Skynyrd's image

was a "case study" of how "preconceptions laid down by the audience" were fitted together into "large simple pieces." Since many of these preconceptions were negative, Lynyrd Skynyrd must take some responsibility for the survival of the outdated Southern image (Rowland).

In retrospect, instead of being viewed as a progressive band that tried to promote the counter culture, and other changes of the 1960's and early 1970's, Lynyrd Skynyrd must be seen as a conservative backlash to change. Because the Confederate flag did not stop appearing on its album jackets, and because these albums sold extremely well, the fact emerges that conservative feeling was still strong in the South. These undisputed leaders of rebel rock performed in an era in which its Southern listeners thought their region's distinctive character was either dead or quickly dying. Therefore, this band with its Confederate flags, its Rebel yells, its symbolic hats, and its "Dixie" are similar to the earlier "SEC Team of the Decade," Old Miss. Not only did both use Southern symbolism, but this rock group, like the University of Mississippi, provided Southerners "just the right outlet for a mass celebration" of regional pride that banished "anxiety through victory." Finally, despite the growing industrialization, urbanization, and national slant of the South, the Old South survived in popular imagination. Although film historians claim that the cinema ensured the survival of this myth, Lynyrd Skynyrd wholeheartedly supported it; therefore, it must share a major responsibility for its endurance.³⁷

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37. Thornton, "Symbolism at Ole Miss" 260.

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